

# Eastern Europe and the Obama Administration

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From Tallinn to Tbilisi, one of the most common criticisms of the Obama administration is that the U.S. is abandoning its new allies to Russia, and underestimating the threat Russia poses to these countries. This notion persists in spite of the efforts made by the current administration and Vice President Biden who has become, in the words of Nicholas Kulish, the [“reassurer-in-chief,”](#) to restate American support for these countries.

This charge, while not really accurate, reflects the specific security related concerns of many in Eastern Europe as well as broader questions regarding their new role in global politics. This Eastern European view was summarized in a recent [open letter to President Obama](#) from a number of very prominent Eastern European leaders including Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Valdis Adamkus and Mart Laar. The letter speaks of a “growing sense of nervousness in the region” and warns that “too narrow an understanding of Western interests does not lead to the wrong concessions on Russia.”

Citizens and leaders in Eastern Europe cannot be faulted for being worried about Russian policy in the region, particularly given the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia War of 2008. However, there is a danger of several issues being conflated with this fear. The serious concerns about Russia often contribute to a somewhat unfounded fear that the US is going to abandon its allies and principles in Eastern Europe as part of its goal of “resetting” relations with Russia. This fear is not always rational and has not been assuaged by anything President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton or others in the administration have said about the refusal of the U.S. to make any tradeoffs of this kind.

As a result, a political climate has evolved where rational decisions by the U.S., such as not to do missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic or to make NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine a lower priority are viewed in much of the region as evidence of the U.S. giving in to Russia.

A key sub-text of the Eastern European position, however, is that these countries are no longer as important to the U.S. as they were during the Bush years. This is true, but it is due not to a change in the U.S. posture towards these countries, but because of a reinvigorating of trans-Atlantic relations generally because the Bush administration, which was very unpopular in much of western Europe, has come to an end.

During the Bush years, of course, Eastern Europe, referred to as “New Europe” by Bush’s Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, played a special role because they were willing to support U.S. adventurism in Iraq, and Bush’s war on terrorism more generally while most of the countries of western Europe, most notably Germany and France did not support the war in Iraq, or various components of Bush’s anti-terror campaign. This dynamic allowed Eastern Europe to have a special role in Bush’s Washington. During

the Obama administration, these countries have not received the attention to which they have become accustomed, not because the U.S. no longer supports them, but because the U.S. no longer has an acute political need for them.

It is somewhat puzzling for countries, such as Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states, that have recently, and relatively successfully been integrated into the European Union and NATO, to raise these types of concerns. These institutions were supposed to have been guarantors of security, full integration into European economic and political life and identify these countries as unequivocally part of the trans-Atlantic alliance. Nothing is ever 100% guaranteed, but NATO membership has certainly helped make these countries more secure and reduced the threat from Russia. If that were not true, countries like Ukraine and Georgia would not want to get into NATO as much as they do.

Parsing the legitimate fears of Russia from the broader political issues regarding U.S. relations with the region is difficult, but it also suggests that these countries find themselves at a difficult crossroads. They are transitioning from being post-Communist or new Europe, with the corresponding set of special needs and concerns, to being simply part of Europe and NATO. The Obama administration out of political expedience or convenience seems to be treating them as the latter while the recent letter and other statements seem to indicate that many leaders still see their countries as the former.